

ARGENTINA IN A CHANGING NUCLEAR ORDER: AN APPRAISAL

FOR MUCH OF ITS MODERN HISTORY, Argentina has alternatively punched under and over its weight and has struggled to attain a balance between domestic and international responsibilities, on the one hand, and between its Western and Latin American identities, on the other hand. Argentine foreign policy has typically been an instrument of domestic politics, in which rhetorical gestures on the international scene have sometimes yielded short-term domestic gains. The Argentine National Congress has historically played a rather marginal role in foreign policy, and this has reinforced the autonomy of the presidency in designing and executing it. Moreover, an ever more fragmented and denationalized party system has only increased the parochial view of the Argentine political elite. As a result, foreign policy in Argentina has remained almost solely in the domain of the executive and has been fairly dependent on the ideas and preferences of the president and the president's inner circle of trusted advisers. This may explain in part why Argentina's foreign policy may be seen as somewhat erratic or inconsistent across administrations.

And yet, Argentina's history with nuclear affairs has been much more stable than the overall trajectory of its foreign policy. Yes, there have been changes since the 1980s, when the country returned to democracy, but overall, Argentina has developed a bottom-up, consensus-based, incremental approach to the nuclear order. In this light, Argentina's nuclear preferences have evolved from unilateral postures in the 1970s and 1980s toward bilateral and multilateral commitments from the 1990s onward.

Even before Argentina became the first Latin American country to use nuclear energy when its first commercial nuclear power reactor went online in 1974, it defended the right to nuclear development for peaceful purposes. During the 1960s, Argentina took a critical stand against the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and depicted it as

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the “disarmament of the disarmed,” in the words of José María Ruda, then the Argentine ambassador to the United Nations.¹ Between the 1960s and the 1980s, its nuclear program included unsafe-guarded nuclear facilities for uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, yet Argentina never made the political decision to develop nuclear weapons.

With the return of democracy in 1983, military programs were firmly placed under civilian control. In the 1980s, a rapprochement with Brazil took place, and in 1991, a bilateral framework, the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC), was established to further nuclear cooperation. That same year, Argentina signed the Quadripartite Agreement with the ABACC, Brazil, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the application of nuclear safeguards. The ABACC framework transformed the nature of Brazil-Argentina relations. In 1993, Argentina joined two multilateral export control regimes—the Australia Group and the Missile Technology Control Regime. A year later, Argentina joined the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (Treaty of Tlatelolco) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), a multilateral export control regime, and acceded to the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state in 1995. The next year, Argentina became a founding participating state of the Wassenaar Arrangement, a multilateral export control regime focusing on arms and dual-use technology. In sum, Argentina's nuclear preferences have evolved to focus on lines of dialogue, confidence building, and incremental engagement with the global nuclear order.

A number of reasons may explain Argentina's nuclear preferences, but the main rationale so far has been that it sees the benefit of making the existing system work. In the 1990s, Argentina adhered to most of the multilateral nuclear arrangements to signal its overture to the West in general and to the United States in particular. As a result, Argentina abandoned its most controversial projects, including the Condor missile program. This, of course, alienated domestic actors (such as the armed forces and nuclear research agencies) with vested interests in the nuclear sector who voiced nationalist concerns. Ultimately, however, a neoliberal ideology trumped technology.

From 2003 onward—for a number of reasons, including the 2004 energy crisis—Argentina witnessed its own version of a nuclear renaissance and embarked on a number of ambitious programs to upgrade its nuclear profile. This renaissance has taken place mainly through domestic and international institutions and has been subject to bilateral and multilateral safeguards that Argentina accepts as legitimate standards for upholding the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Simply put, Argentina downloaded the software (that is, global regulations) in the 1990s, only to move forward with the hardware (that is, nuclear technology) ten years later. Indeed, Argentina is part of various multilateral arrangements and coalitions of the willing—for example, the Proliferation Security Initiative and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism—which would hardly seem to be attractive venues for domestic constituencies prone to anti-imperial maneuvers of sorts. Yet, Argentina has realized that it pays to engage with these multilateral instruments as they serve the dual purposes of reducing uncertainty about Argentina’s nuclear preferences and ensuring swift access to resources in order to improve its nuclear standing. Said another way, technology has trumped ideology.

ENSURING THE RIGHT TO PEACEFUL NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY

Argentina’s priority is to make the regime work to ensure that all recognized non-nuclear-weapon states maintain the right to develop peaceful nuclear programs. Argentina is committed to ensuring a level playing field wherein each NPT member has the right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Argentina understands that nuclear technology has a role to play in national development and therefore aims to strengthen its position as a nuclear supplier of know-how, technology, and materials. Thus, Argentina opposes the internationalization of the nuclear fuel cycle as it would deepen the technological divide that already exists among the haves and have-nots of the NPT regime.²

REDUCING THE SALIENCE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Argentina supports a reduced role for nuclear weapons in national security strategies and is fully committed to the goal of nuclear disarmament. Argentina’s nuclear program is firmly oriented toward research and development; it has an entirely civilian outlook and is controlled by a strong, independent nuclear regulatory agency. The scale of its program is rather small, with only three operating nuclear reactors and a share in electricity production of only about 10 percent.³ In 2010, Argentina reactivated its gaseous diffusion

uranium enrichment plant at Pilcaniyeu and started to develop an indigenous technology based on laser enrichment, which is in the proof-of-concept phase as of 2016.⁴ In 2015, then Argentine president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner announced that the country was enriching uranium, albeit in small quantities.⁵

Moreover, Argentina has exported nuclear reactors, radioactive substances (radioisotopes), and nuclear laboratories to a number of countries, including Algeria, Australia, Brazil, Egypt, and Peru. It is also an exporter of the molybdenum-99 radioisotope, widely used in nuclear medicine, and it is the third-largest supplier of the cobalt-60 radioisotope, a radiation source for medical radiotherapy, industrial radiography, and medical equipment sterilization.⁶ Thus, the main focus of Argentina's nuclear program is not nuclear deterrence or power ambitions but energy, research, and development.

AVOIDING RAISING PROLIFERATION CONCERNS

Even taking into account its limitations of scale and investment, Argentina aims to find its niche in the global nuclear marketplace. In this respect, the main challenge for Argentina is to work toward a nonproliferation regime that allows the country to continue its nuclear program without causing proliferation, safety, or security concerns. This challenge has at least five dimensions.

First, Argentina, along with Brazil, is still reluctant to sign the Additional Protocol, which provides the IAEA with greater authority to, among other things, verify the absence of undeclared nuclear activities and facilities. Argentina believes that the protocol imposes further nonproliferation burdens on non-nuclear-weapon states even as the P5 states (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) continue to possess nuclear arsenals. For Argentina, therefore, the Additional Protocol establishes an

even more unequal nuclear nonproliferation regime. Further, the requirement to adopt the protocol draws a thin line between nonproliferation and development restrictions. The Nuclear Suppliers Group provides a good example. In 2011, 46 members of the NSG amended the group's guidelines for exports of sensitive items to mandate members to require the Additional Protocol in recipient states. Argentina and Brazil opposed

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this mandate and argued that their bilateral safeguards under the ABACC regime could be construed as being equal to the protocol. As a result, in June 2011, the NSG approved revised guidelines for the export of sensitive nuclear technologies and recognized the Quadripartite Agreement as an alternative to the Additional Protocol.⁷

Second, safety has become a more salient issue in the Argentine nuclear sector, and there are signs that this will be a hot topic of discussion in years to come. Indeed, some serious safety problems in Belgium, Japan, and South Korea, among other countries, have led to concerns about the safety of nuclear power stations around the world. These concerns have been, and will continue to be, quite visible in Germany, Switzerland, and other countries with active environmentalist nongovernmental organizations and strong Green parties that influence public opinion on nuclear energy. European divisions over nuclear power have therefore deepened since the 2011 Fukushima disaster, and there is growing polarization about what can be done to continue to ensure safety in nuclear power plants. Argentina is worried about the extreme position presented by Germany and Switzerland (where the governments consider no level of radiation exposure to be safe). In other words, hypersafety will become a contested topic in Argentine diplomacy.⁸

Third, while Argentina's concerns rest more on the economic end of the threat spectrum, proliferation continues to be a challenge that must be addressed. In this sense, Argentina supports the recent P5+1 (plus Germany) nuclear agreement with Iran.⁹ Although it is far from perfect, it was achieved through diplomatic—and not military—means and Iran's right to develop nuclear energy was preserved, something that is important to Argentina from a normative perspective.

Fourth, it is probable that security is the least problematic issue for Argentina. South America is mostly a zone of interstate peace. At the domestic level, there are no fierce ethnic, religious, or subnational challenges that may pose security threats. Moreover, transnational terrorism is mostly absent in the region. Yes, there have always been suspicions regarding the presence of organized crime and terrorist groups such as Hezbollah in South America's triple border, where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet on the Paraná River, but these threats remain marginal.

Fifth, the bilateral relationship with Brazil needs further dialogue and creative thought. The two countries have taken divergent paths in their respective nuclear diplomacies. Brazil appears to be more reticent to join the various nonproliferation-related groups such as the Wassenaar Arrangement or the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. In Brasília, there are more domestic voices critical of the NPT than in the mid-2000s, and the probability of Brazil signing the Additional Protocol remains quite low. Argentina seems to have taken a more pragmatic approach. Mauricio Macri, who

assumed office as the Argentine president in December 2015, will have to decide whether the country is ready to take the next step and sign the Additional Protocol—with or without Brazil.

MAINTAINING THE GLOBAL STATUS QUO

Argentina's priorities are more domestically than internationally focused. In 2009, the government issued the Nuclear Activity Law, which declared the country's nuclear industry a matter of national interest. In 2014, Argentina completed its third nuclear power reactor, Atucha II, which in June of that year reached its first criticality. The government's goal is for nuclear power to grow and reach a share of 15 to 18 percent in the country's energy mix.¹⁰ In 2012, Argentina agreed with the China National Nuclear Corporation to build a fourth nuclear plant, a pressurized heavy-water reactor that would be financed by China. This agreement includes the transfer of fuel fabrication and other technologies. In 2014, Argentina and China signed another agreement for a fifth nuclear plant, the ACP1000, based on a light-water design using enriched uranium. In April 2015, Argentina and Russia signed a framework for cooperation on the construction of a sixth nuclear power plant with Russian financing. Lastly, Argentina has stepped into the business of building small modular reactors with the aim of providing a flexible, cost-effective energy alternative in hard-to-reach locations. The indigenous design, CAREM (Argentine Power Station of Modular Elements), is a simplified pressurized-water reactor intended to provide an electrical output of 100 megawatts or less. The fuel is uranium oxide with uranium-235 enriched to 3.4 percent.¹¹

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For all these domestic priorities, maintaining the global status quo is central to ensuring that Argentina meets its rather ambitious domestic targets. In this sense, a clear priority so far has been, and will continue to be, full engagement in the ongoing discussions taking place in the various nuclear clubs. To do this, the country has relied heavily on U.S. initiatives in furthering information-sharing mechanisms and joint training

exercises. Take the Proliferation Security Initiative, established in 2003, which seeks to improve multilateral interdiction efforts and, as of early 2016, is supported by more than 100 countries. Argentina has not been a passive partner in this initiative but has played

an important role through its participation in the Operational Experts Group, which comprises 21 states working to ensure the initiative's effectiveness.

Moreover, in 2006, a group of countries established the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, a partnership of more than 80 states committed to strengthening global and national capabilities to prevent, detect, and respond to nuclear terrorism. As of 2016, Argentina—which joined in 2010—along with Chile, Mexico, and Panama are the only Latin American countries to participate in this initiative. Argentina also became a full participant in the International Framework for Nuclear Energy Cooperation in 2011, one year after its establishment. Also that year, Argentina ratified the 2005 Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material. In November 2012, Argentina and the IAEA organized a regional workshop on the physical protection of nuclear material. The same year, Argentina held a regional workshop on protection against sabotage of nuclear facilities. Moreover, in the framework provided by the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, Argentina and Chile organized an exercise to respond to and mitigate terrorist acts. Argentina has also incorporated nuclear security in courses on nuclear and radiation safety in its training centers for nuclear technicians. On August 27, 2014, the Argentine National Congress approved the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism. And in June 2015, Argentina assumed the chair of the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

This nuclear diplomacy makes one thing clear: Argentina is willing to engage in the global discussion and to commit to the adoption of high standards related to safeguards, security, and safety. Yes, Argentinians have not put pressure on their leaders to sign the Additional Protocol, and the country is unhappy with ever more demanding nonproliferation measures given the absence of serious discussion on nuclear disarmament among the P5. Yet on these issues, as with so much else, Argentina plays the constructive and responsible role of the loyal opposition.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the 1980s, Brazil has always been Argentina's partner in determining how to face the two countries' challenges in their relationship to the nuclear order. And yet, the rationale for continuing to view Brazil in this way is not as clear in 2016.

Argentina needs Brazil as much as Brazil needs Argentina, but the dialogue and cooperation in 2016 is not what it was just a few years before. Between 2014 and 2015, ABACC survived solely on Argentine financial installments, as Brazil did not contribute its share until June 2015. It is true that this was not because of anti-ABACC sentiment in Brasília

but mainly due to an economic recession that resulted in severe budget cuts. Yet even so, the situation was not a good sign for and did not give a good impression of the effectiveness of the bilateral safeguards regime.

Argentina must deal with the shaky bilateral arrangement, and thus much of its nuclear diplomacy will surely depend on how it establishes a new equilibrium with Brazil. A renewed framework with Brazil should expand the cooperation basket by linking nuclear energy with other scientific and technological dimensions, such as space, research, and medicine. And without a doubt, signing the Additional Protocol without Brazil would be a mistake that would be difficult for Argentina to overcome.

At the global level, Argentina has seen that it is in its national interest to make the nuclear regime work on its behalf. If this observation is sound, then Argentina should continue working under the umbrella of the nuclear nonproliferation regime; it should continue working with the P5—all of the countries, not just the Western nuclear-weapon states—as opposed to against or for them. The Argentine government should also continue its policy of ensuring that nuclear technology plays a role in the country's national development. This means balancing Argentina's national responsibilities geared toward development with its international responsibilities oriented toward increasing trust and dialogue among NPT members. These two sets of responsibilities, of course, will not always be in harmony as the reluctance to sign the Additional Protocol makes clear. Yet for Argentina, the challenge will be to strike the right balance between the two and, in doing so, to find a way to carve its own niche in the nuclear order.

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NOTES

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